



Issue Alert: History/Civics Education

Recently, concerns have been raised with House/Senate compromise legislation being developed to establish several new civics and history education programs, building off of H.R. 1078, introduced by Rep. Roger Wicker. Below is a description of the problems with the original compromise bill that we have been able to address, a summary of the new compromise, and issues raised with the bill by outside groups. The RSC has not taken a position on this legislation.

Problem #1: The bill listed “the separation of church and state” as a “key idea” in U.S. history. This language has been changed to read that a key idea is “the establishment clause.”

Problem #2: Information/best practices clearinghouses for teachers established in the bill were not required to coordinate with the Presidential Academies (also established in the bill) where teachers would develop such best practices. This language has been changed to require the clearinghouses and the academies to coordinate. In addition, the list of eligible grantees has been expanded to include educational institutions (which includes non-profit groups).

Problem #3: While evaluations were required of the academy programs, no similar evaluation was required for the “We the People” program included in the bill. The new compromise bill requires such an evaluation.

Problem #4: The new programs established in the bill are duplicative of current programs at the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Language has been added to the bill to require a GAO report on the duplicative nature of existing history and civics programs.

Summary of the New Compromise Bill

The compromise bill establishes several new civics and history education programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

- Presidential Academies for Teaching American History and Civics: awards grants to educational institutions to hold summer workshops for civics and history teachers to “enhance the teachers’ knowledge about civics and history” and to learn how to better teach those subjects. Authorizes 40 percent of the total authorization (\$10 million out of \$25 million).
- Congressional Academies for Students of American History and Civics: awards grants to educational institutions to hold summer workshops for outstanding students in civics and history to “broaden and deepen such

students' understanding of American history and civics.” Authorizes 24 percent of the total authorization (\$6 million out of \$25 million).

- National Clearinghouse for Teachers of American History and Civics: awards grants to state organizations or partnerships to create clearinghouses for elementary and secondary school teachers of American history and civics. The clearinghouses would “facilitate the sharing of ideas” and “encourage best practices” through websites, seminars, local chapters, and other activities. Authorizes 4 percent of the total authorization (\$1 million out of \$25 million).
- We the People: establishes a “We the People” program to sponsor activities that support the teaching of American history and civics, such as the Heroes of History lecture series, the national history bee, and the “idea of America” essay contest (note: these are current NEH activities). Authorizes 32 percent of the total authorization (\$8 million of \$25 million).

The bill also requires that within two years of the bills’ enactment, GAO must review existing history programs in the Department of Education, the NEH, and other federally supported programs and report to Congress on duplication in such programs.

Outside Group Concerns

Eagle Forum is opposed to the original Wicker legislation (H.R. 1078). Eagle Forum is concerned that the new programs are duplicative and seek to teach teachers what they should already be learning in colleges and universities. Eagle Forum is also concerned with past NEH activities with regard to American history. In 1995, NEH and the Department of Education developed “The National Standards for United States History” that made no mention of Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, the Wright brothers, or General Robert E. Lee but included references to MTV, Madonna, and Murphy Brown. The Senate denounced these standards by a vote of 99-1.

Rep. Wicker's office responds, “Many history and civics teachers are teaching outside of their college areas. The professional development provided through the Presidential Academies allows teachers to gain the knowledge need to teach our children. These summer academies will complement the professional development done during the year.”

The Gun Owners of America have also expressed opposition to the Wicker bill. GOA is also concerned with past NEH activities related to the “We the People” curriculum developed by the National Center for Civic Education. This curriculum asks students whether the right to keep and bear arms is still as “important today” as it was in the eighteenth century and to decide what “limitations” should be placed on the right. According to GOA, the curriculum also pushes global citizenship over national citizenship, encouraging students to think in terms of global (i.e., U.N.) solutions (RSC note: the “We the People” book includes the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights in a documents section alongside the U.S. Constitution). Nothing in the bill requires or precludes the use of the “We the People” curriculum in the Presidential or Congressional academies.